

“What God Hath Joined Together...” Acts 11:1-18

May 6, 2007

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We’re approaching the season of weddings. In fact, we received an invitation for one in yesterday’s mail. Weddings are complicated rituals because no matter how much the couple is in love, they find themselves negotiating the meeting and joining of two families. In most ceremonies that I perform, the pronouncement of marriage is a holy moment when the I end by saying: “what God hath joined together, let no one put asunder.” These words make the decision that two people make transcendent as God, the Creator of life and love, proclaims their decision to be also the Divine’s decision. “What God hath joined together, let no one put asunder.”

In today’s text God proclaims a divine decision, and that decision is that God’s love is inclusive; it is inclusive of Gentiles whom the Jews separated themselves from because the Jews believed that Gentiles were not chosen, and they were not pure. They had not performed the rituals necessary to be members of God’s “in-group.” Of course, the Jews had good reason to feel special, because we read in scripture of their chosenness, their being lead by God out of slavery to a land of their own, and later from exile in Babylon to return to their city of Jerusalem. Although even in Hebrew scripture there are striking examples of God’s reaching out to foreigners.

One example comes from the Book of Jonah when God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh, a land of foreigners who were considered the evil empire of that time. We know the first part of that story well--Jonah tries to run away and is swallowed by a big fish; then eventually he goes and declares God’s words to these foreigners, who then repent of their evil. But rather than being proud that his sermon was so effective, Jonah is disappointed because he feels the Nineties are let off the hook way too easily. Jonah thinks that God loves too easily. It was a difficult idea for the Jewish people who felt they had obeyed God for better for worse, for richer for poorer, to think God might extend God’s love to the worst of the worst. Yet, God is God.

So here in Acts is Peter, a giant of the early church. He has a great deal of influence, and his colleagues are deeply disappointed in him, because he has shared table fellowship with Gentile people, and to share table fellowship was a ritual demonstration of acceptance of the other. Peter must explain himself to the church council at Jerusalem who are none too happy. And so he does explain....Peter has seen a vision and that vision was one of inclusiveness. And God’s voice was part of that vision, and God said that this mix of clean and unclean animals, of clean and unclean laws, was now outdated. All are welcome to the table to experience the risen Christ.

I announced last week that weekly Bible studies were over for the summer; but I have to tell you, I might reconsider because, my Wednesday morning class of Doris, Marion, and me helps me so much to prepare for my sermons. As we contemplated this text, Doris asked this amazing question: “Does this mean that God changed his mind?” Over the years the church has had a lot of trouble with the idea that God might change God’s mind. But the Bible doesn’t seem to have that problem. The prophet Hosea in chapter 11 gives us a fiery speech where God is fed up and is going to destroy Judea; and then abruptly, God says, but how can I give you up, you are my child.

Today’s text reinforces the fact that God can do what God wills. And Peter, says to his accusers: “who was I that I could hinder God?” (v.17) We humans seem to need a God who never changes God’s mind; but the Bible describes a God who wants a relationship with us and a God whose love is grounded in mercy. What doesn’t change is God’s mercy and love that endures forever. It is God’s mercy and love that we trust will never change. Like good parents who sometimes change course, it is possible that if God would wish to do so, God could change God’s mind, and “who are we that we would hinder God?”

Then of course, maybe God always intended that fullness of life be universal and that the Jewish Christians, like us sometimes, just didn't understand. They valued "the law" and obeying the law in their minds determined faithfulness. God values obedience; we value obedience; but there's always these things called mercy, forgiveness, and love that trumps "the rule of law." Next Sunday we will be in Chicago to watch Brittany graduate from law school. A while back she and I were talking and she said to me that law and justice are two different things. She said that laws are rules constructed to order society and that's what lawyers work on, but justice transcends a "list of rules." Justice is what philosophers and theologians work on.

As we ponder Peter's vision from God that declares nothing that God created to be unclean, I invite us to silently think for a few seconds who today society diminishes as "less than" or "defective", who contrary to human thought God would choose to announce as acceptable, as valuable. Who the "outsiders" are in our society today? How far does God's love extend? Let's us meditate in silence.

I recall a story, which I may have told you before but it's worth repeating. During the great turmoil between the Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, a meeting was called as an experiment in peacemaking. Both Catholics and Protestants came together including their religious leaders and the folks of their religious communities. They very uncomfortably intermingled. Within this group there was a young boy mesmerized by a Catholic priest who was setting not far from him. The boy inched his way slowly until he was close enough to touch the priest's robe. The priest felt the boy's touch and their eyes met. The young boy drew back in fear. And the priest asked him what he was afraid of. The child said that his mother had told him never, ever to touch a priest or something awful would happen to him, but the child said, "I touched you and nothing happened." To which the priest replied, "Oh yes, something happened, something very important happened, and you and I shall never again be the same."

Peter had a divine vision that brought together those who dared not touch one another. And he didn't reject that vision as a figment of his imagination. His heart was opened to the still-speaking voice of God, and he knew that he could not dare to hinder God's extending love, mercy, and justice beyond the narrow confines of Jewish ethnicity.

I am reading a wonderful book that Hal and Agnes gave to me called, *The Tent of Abraham*. It tells stories of hope and peace for the three major religions, Jews, Christians, and Muslims, all descendants of Abraham. These stories spring from gatherings of a small group of people from the three religious traditions who call themselves "The Tent of Abraham, Hagar, and Sarah." I'd like to quote from the introduction:

Ancient tradition teaches that Abraham, Hagar, and Sarah kept their tent open in all four directions of the world so that travelers who thirsted for water or hungered for food might be welcomed instantly and warmly, no matter the direction from which they came. Today we open this 'tent of Abraham' to welcome all--Muslim, Christian, Jew, those of other traditions and communities or none--who thirst after Unity and hunger for peace.

It's a beautiful image -- a tent open in all directions. As I studied our text in Acts I noticed that this sheet that was lowered in Peter's vision came from heaven lowered by its four corners like the corners of Abraham's tent, opened to the four corners of the earth. This is indeed an extravagant welcome. Today as Christians we say "yes" to our oneness by gathering around this table where we taste a morsel of bread and wet our lips with the cup of blessing. Out of context, what we do may appear strangely odd, but within community it says clearly that we are one. Here love, justice, and mercy transcend law. Here we share. Here we accept. Here we say: "What God hath joined together, let no one put asunder." Amen